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THE LIMITS OF DIRECT ATTENTION

Abstract

I argue that direct attention has a limited disclosive capacity. First, I argue that there are certain phenomena that direct attention is fundamentally incapable of disclosing, since there exists a fundamental tension between the nature of these phenomena on the one hand and direct attention on the other. Second, I show that situations in which we aim to access our own higher-order thought processes constitute a further category of cases in which direct attention is limited. Third, I argue, drawing on Heidegger, that direct attention is not only limited when we aim to gain knowledge of ourselves and our own minds, but also with respect to knowledge of our existence and the world around us.

Keywords: attention, self-knowledge, method, Heidegger, phenomenology

I. Introduction

In the short essayistic story “Über das Marionettentheater”, Heinrich von Kleist presents a vignette that contains a powerful message about the conditions required for certain qualities to flourish. He has his protagonist tell a brief anecdote:

Ich badete mich, erzählte ich, vor etwa drei Jahren, mit einem jungen Mann, über dessen Bildung damals eine wunderbare Anmut verbreitet war. Er mochte ohngefähr in seinem sechszehnten Jahre stehn, und nur ganz von fern ließen sich, von der Gunst der Frauen herbeigerufen, die ersten Spuren von Eitelkeit erblicken. Es traf sich, daß wir grade kurz zuvor in Paris den Jüngling gesehen hatten, der sich einen Splitter aus dem Fuße zieht; der Abguß der Statue ist bekannt und befindet sich in den meisten deutschen Sammlungen. Ein Blick, den er in dem Augenblick, da er den Fuß auf den Schemel setzte, um ihn abzutrocknen, in einen großen Spiegel warf, erinnerte ihn daran; er lächelte und sagte mir, Welch eine Entdeckung er gemacht habe. In der Tat hatte ich, in eben diesem Augenblick, dieselbe

gemacht; doch sei es, um die Sicherheit der Grazie, die ihm beiwohnte, zu prüfen, sei es, um seiner Eitelkeit ein wenig heilsam zu begegnen: ich lachte und erwiderte – er sähe wohl Geister! Er errötete, und hob den Fuß zum zweitenmal, um es mir zu zeigen; doch der Versuch, wie sich leicht hätte voraussehen lassen, mißglückte. Er hob verwirrt den Fuß zum dritten und vierten, er hob ihn wohl noch zehnmal: umsonst! er war außerstand dieselbe Bewegung wieder hervorzubringen – was sag ich? die Bewegungen, die er machte, hatten ein so komisches Element, daß ich Mühe hatte, das Gelächter zurückzuhalten:

Von diesem Tage, gleichsam von diesem Augenblick an, ging eine unbegreifliche Veränderung mit dem jungen Menschen vor. Er fing an, tagelang vor dem Spiegel zu stehen; und immer ein Reiz nach dem anderen verließ ihn. Eine unsichtbare und unbegreifliche Gewalt schien sich, wie ein eisernes Netz, um das freie Spiel seiner Gebärden zu legen, und als ein Jahr verflossen war, war keine Spur mehr von der Lieblichkeit in ihm zu entdecken, die die Augen der Menschen sonst, die ihn umringten, ergötzt hatte.¹

What Kleist (or at least his protagonist) seems to be suggesting by this anecdote is that grace is not something that can be achieved intentionally. It has to come spontaneously, not as the product of any reflection. When it comes to grace, reflection and intention inevitably disrupt the very thing we aim to achieve through them. The anecdote very clearly illustrates something that is central to my concern in the current paper. For in broad terms, the relation between object and approach – the fact that certain types of subject matter simply do not tolerate certain methods for disclosing them or bringing them about – is exactly what this paper will deal with.

More specifically, my concern in the current paper shall be with one particular method: direct attention. We naturally assume that in order to come to know something, we need to focus our attention directly on that thing itself. Training our attention on some object or phenomenon is generally assumed to be helpful – even necessary – in developing a grasp of it. While I do not intend to dispute the usefulness of direct attention as an approach in general, I shall argue that direct attention nevertheless has a limited disclosive capacity. My basic assertion is that there exist phenomena that cannot at all be disclosed – described, captured – by means of direct attention, and that, moreover, there is a wider category of phenomena that do not show themselves most truly or fully if they are directly and intentionally focused on. My aim here is to indicate three distinct ways in which direct attention is limited. Considering the

available space, these discussions will have to leave much unsaid, and indeed unargued for. Nevertheless, I hope they will contribute towards our understanding of the impossibility of and, more broadly, the limitations on describing certain phenomena by means of direct attention, and open up some avenues for more detailed explorations of this issue.

The problem with direct attention is part of a broader philosophical issue, which concerns the relation between subject matter and method. My conviction is that the right philosophical approach in every situation depends on the subject matter at issue. This insight, I believe, is often underestimated in philosophy. It can be tempting to assume that there are philosophical methods that can be used no matter what our topic is. This assumption strikes me as mistaken. There are methods that may in many cases be perfectly useful, but that are still not appropriate in every situation, and the point of the current paper is to work out one case for which this is true. My general point then, would be that we always have to review the appropriateness of a certain method with respect to the subject matter we aim to disclose or understand. What I am, indirectly but ultimately, trying to advance here, then, is our understanding of the way in which the subject matter of a philosophical endeavour and the method used to disclose this subject matter ought to be attuned.

II. Fundamental incompatibility

The phenomenon I am principally concerned with here is the fact that direct attention sometimes radically fails to capture the subject matter we aim to disclose. Let me give a brief example to illustrate one rather profound way in which it fails. Imagine that I have noticed I have a tendency to get distracted from my work if there is music playing, and I want to get a better grasp of the process of this distraction. Imagine further that I plan to do this by means of focusing directly on my distraction, catching it in the act, so to speak. It is not hard to see what would happen: as my mind starts to wander, I quickly focus on this wandering, but as I do so, making the wandering the direct object of my attention, I inevitably alter the action my mind is engaged in. Instead of slipping into thoughtlessly listening to the music, or indeed into a series of spontaneous thoughts somehow triggered by what I hear, I am now focused and alert, but the intended object of my focus has disappeared. In other words: in focusing on my distraction, I disrupt the very process I aimed to capture.

In this example, I take it, it is quite clear *that* direct attention fails. But it is much trickier than it may initially seem to identify exactly *how* and *why* it does. In order to gain some initial clarity about this, I shall discuss a series of contrasting pairs of cases – in each case one in which direct attention appears to be unproblematic, and one in which it is problematic. These exemplars will aid in constructing and analysing a series of hypotheses aimed at capturing the pertinent difference between the problematic and unproblematic scenarios, with the intention of gradually sharpening our understanding of the incompatibility under discussion.

First, however, I should note that my target in this paper is not “direct attention” in the maximally inclusive meaning of that term. What I am concerned with here are forms of direct attention in which we identify or isolate an object in order to focus on it (presumably on the assumption that this will aid our ability to grasp it). So when I discuss a case in which I attend directly to my distraction, I will assume that this means that I intentionally focus on the distraction as such – that, in other words, the subject matter is identified as a step in the process of training my attention on it directly. I do not intend to imply that such an element of isolation-and-focus must be part of every possible construal of the idea of direct attention; indeed, there certainly are approaches that would reasonably count as direct attention that do not involve this. However, I do think that this element is quite typical and widespread in the use of direct attention as an approach, and therefore, this form of direct attention strikes me as a valuable target.

Now if I want to describe the cup of water that sits in front of me on my desk, this task allows for, and in fact seems to require, direct attention. In order to determine the colour, size, shape and visual details of the cup, I have to look at it – or at least looking at it helps. And I can do so, because my looking at the cup does not interfere with my task of describing it; the phenomenon is left intact. In contrast, as I have argued above, if I try to capture the process of getting distracted or lost in my own thoughts, direct attention does not help at all in doing so – it disrupts the very phenomenon I aim to get clearer about. Direct attention is incapable of revealing the process of distraction. Or to be precise: it seems impossible for me to study *my own* distraction, from a first-person standpoint, by means of direct attention. It is important that the limit on direct attention made evident by this example seems to be *absolute*. The fact that, in the situation sketched, my distraction is unavailable to me, is not an accident. The process of getting distracted and the action of paying attention are

intrinsically at odds; it is *fundamentally* impossible for direct attention to reveal my own distraction to me.

What accounts for this discrepancy? What are the salient differences between these phenomena? One difference that immediately stands out is the fact that the former phenomenon – the cup of water – is (for all intents and purposes) a static thing, while the latter – my mind wandering – is a process. In other words, my mind wandering is a phenomenon with a significant temporal component, whereas the cup is not. However, this difference cannot be salient, for not every process or temporal phenomenon suffers from the same problem. In other words, there are cases that share the characteristic of temporality that are nevertheless unproblematic in terms of description through direct attention. If I want to describe the flight of a sparrow outside my window, the dynamic and temporal character of that phenomenon does not inhibit my ability to describe it. (The sparrow may, of course, fly too fast for me to follow it, or disappear from my field of vision, but the temporal nature of its flight does not *in principle* present a fundamental difficulty.)

Another explanation might be that in the case of the cup of water, the object I want to describe seems to be quite independent from my observing it – I can observe it from a distance, as it were, without interacting with it or influencing it –, whereas in the case of my distracted thoughts, my act of observation necessarily interacts with the phenomenon at issue. The hypothesis, then, would be that the problem with the description of my wandering thoughts is that this endeavour suffers from a sort of fundamental *observer effect*: that the act of observation – or, in this case, the act of attending directly to something – *necessarily and irrevocably* changes the phenomenon at issue.

But to ask very generally whether interaction with the phenomenon is what is problematic about the case of distraction is, in a way, to beg the question. Because even the most bare description of the problem I am using as a basis contains this very idea: directing attention to what my mind is doing *disrupts the phenomenon I aim to capture*. If the general formulation of the problem is that direct attention disrupts the intended phenomenon, then it is part of the very formulation of the problem that interaction is at the heart of it, because disruption is simply a specific form of interaction. So rather than to ask *whether* interaction is problematic, we will have to ask *what kind* of interaction is. In other words, my task now is to sharpen this distinction between the idea of “observing from a distance” and “interacting with”.

In order to get clearer on the appropriate extension of “distance” in these kinds of cases, it might be helpful to consider some cases more closely related to distraction, in the hope of making a boundary emerge. First of all, it is significant that distraction is not unique in its incompatibility with direct attention. A similar interaction between matter and method takes place in the case of a phenomenon like absorption. I cannot get clearer about what it is like – from a first-person perspective – to be absorbed in a book or a daydream, by attending directly to my absorption, because as soon as I turn my attention to my state of mind, making it an object of consideration, I break the absorption. The act of attending to my absorption inevitably disrupts the very phenomenon I aim to capture.

One explanation that is attractive at first sight – something that distraction and absorption have in common, but in which they differ from the description of the cup – is that this discordance is due to the fact that I try to attend to something that *my mind* is engaged in. Nevertheless, this conclusion would be mistaken. It is, for instance, altogether possible to attend to a deep sadness I am experiencing without thus disrupting the experience of sadness. The same goes for joy or happiness. In a way, this is quite remarkable, because it would seem that sadness and joy – or at least certain kinds of sadness and joy – can be very immediate, unreflective experiences. (Of course it is possible to be sad or joyful *about* something, but there seem to be many types of sadness, or joy – or perhaps melancholia is an even better example – that are *just present* without having an intentional structure at all – they are not *about* something; they simply are there.) The problem, then, cannot lie in the combination of direct attention together with any other act of mind *simpliciter*. It is not that all acts of mind as such are incompatible with the particular act of mind that is direct attention; rather, the incompatibility arises only between direct attention and *certain* other acts of mind. And if sadness and joy are compatible with direct attention, then even experiences that seem very immediate and unreflective in character are not necessarily disrupted by being made into objects of reflection or direct attention. So what defines those acts of mind that *are* incompatible with direct attention, if not just an element of immediacy?

Before I try to tackle this question further, it seems important to consider the other side of the relationship in a bit more detail. Because the case of absorption makes it clear that it is important to be a bit more precise not just about the nature of the object or phenomenon, but about the extension of the idea of direct attention as an approach. For what

absorption makes clear, I think, is that it is not direct attention *as such*, so to say, not every element of this approach that is problematic. First, a brief note on the relation between attention and awareness is in order. For the purposes of this paper, I shall assume that I can be conscious/aware of something without attending to it, but that attending to something (in the sense I have in mind here) will make me aware of it. So awareness does not imply attention, but attention does imply awareness. Now in the case of absorption, it would be a mistake to say that it is a *lack of attention* (or a lack of awareness²) that is required for the phenomenon to remain intact, or, conversely, that it is *awareness simpliciter* that would disrupt the phenomenon. For when I am absorbed in a book or a daydream, I am of course very much aware of the object of my absorption – the melody and the timbre of the music I am listening to, the mood of the protagonist – and I may even directly attend to these features. What I do *not* seem to be able to be aware of, at the same time as being absorbed in something, is my absorption *as* absorption – it does not seem possible to both be absorbed in a book and at the same time to be directly aware of, or to be focused on, the fact that I am so absorbed. So – on the supposition that attention creates awareness – I cannot attend directly to my absorption *qua* absorption without disrupting my state of mind of being absorbed. Something very similar holds for distraction. If this is true, then it is not the mere presence of attention or awareness that is disruptive of phenomena such as distraction or absorption. It is not the case that as soon as I am aware of something, or as soon as I attend to or am focused on something, I can no longer be distracted, or absorbed. It is only when my attention is directed specifically to my absorption *qua* absorption, or my distraction *as such*, that I am no longer in the process of getting distracted or being absorbed. So it is not any kind of attention, or even direct attention, that is incompatible with phenomena such as these. Rather, it must be some kind of second-order or meta-attention – attention that is directed at my attention and its objects; attention that is concerned with establishing what I am focused on – that is disruptive of phenomena such as distraction or absorption.

Nevertheless, to reiterate, second-order attention is not *necessarily* incompatible with other acts or states of mind. It is not *all* acts of mind that are disrupted by second-order direct attention (which, for the sake of simplicity, I shall now refer to as “direct attention” again). As I pointed out, even acts of mind that seem characterised by a kind of immediacy or lack of intentionality, such as melancholia, can be made into objects

of direct attention without being disrupted. So again, what defines those acts of mind, like absorption and distraction, that *are* incompatible with direct attention?

A simple analogy might help us sharpen the question at this point. What I do when I try to capture through direct attention phenomena such as distraction and attention is like trying to observe myself as I am when I am not observed. (If Kleist is right, and I think he is, then this difference will be profound!) Analogously, what I try to accomplish in approaching phenomena such as distraction or absorption through direct attention is precisely to capture these phenomena as they are uninterrupted. However, the answer to the question why, in certain cases, this is not possible – or under what conditions this is not possible, or given what kind of combination of subject matter and approach this is not possible –, cannot simply be that in order to “have” a phenomenon uninterrupted I simply have to leave it be, whereas any directing attention to it will disturb its “natural” occurrence. Because some phenomena can be the object of direct attention *without* losing their “essential characteristics” – again, melancholia, sadness or joy would qualify here. So the question is: *what makes that direct attention disrupts phenomena such as distraction or absorption, but not phenomena like melancholia, sadness or joy?*

First of all, there is one significant difference between wanting to observe myself as I am unobserved and the case of observing the process of me getting distracted in a direct way. In the former case, what I want more precisely is to see what I look like when I am *not aware* that I am being looked at. For it is not the case that being looked at itself changes the way I appear; it is my awareness of being observed. So in such a case, I could ask a friend to take a picture or make a video when I do not realise anyone is around. But such a solution – capturing the intended phenomenon via external means – is unavailable in the case of distraction, because phenomena such as distraction or absorption can only be experienced from a first-person standpoint. You can of course watch me being distracted and record my behaviour, but you cannot *experience* my distraction and somehow transfer the experience back to me, nor can I experience yours. So one characteristic of the “problematic” phenomena – I mean, those phenomena that cannot be captured by means of direct attention – seems to be that they are somehow essentially first-person experiences.

Still, as I hope to have established by now, not *all* first-person experiences suffer from an incompatibility with direct attention. So exactly what kinds of phenomena do? The best answer I am able to give

at this point unavoidably has an element of *ad hoc*-ness to it. Absorption and distraction, of the kind I have discussed, are characterised by a lack of awareness – not a general lack of awareness, but a specific lack of awareness of the mental processes to which I am subject. But the kind of direct attention that would disclose the process of distraction or the nature of my absorption is attention to precisely those kinds of mental processes, creating awareness of precisely those processes. (This is why it is very important that the precise approach at issue is not attention or awareness in general, but second-order direct attention or meta-attention.) So the kind of direct attention that would be able to do the job of disclosing the processes I am interested in is incompatible with phenomena such as distraction or absorption, because the very nature of such phenomena is determined by a lack of awareness of such processes. And there is no way around this incompatibility, in these cases, because these are fundamentally phenomena that can only be experienced from a first-person standpoint.

This, then, is a firm, indeed fundamental, limit to direct attention as a disclosive instrument. In the next section, I shall argue that we can extend the idea of a limit to direct attention yet further from another angle.

III. Higher-order thought processes

In section II, I have described a set of phenomena that do not admit of being made into objects of second-order attention without being disrupted or even destroyed – cases that are fundamentally incompatible with direct attention, because direct attention simply cannot keep those phenomena intact. In this section, I shall very briefly argue for another category of cases that, while not suffering from a fundamental incompatibility with direct attention, nevertheless suggest a different kind of firm limit to it.

It is well established that we tend to be very poor at identifying the higher-order cognitive processes underlying our actions and decisions. As Nisbett and Wilson show in their seminal paper on verbal reports about mental processes, we are often unaware of the causes of our actions (or in the language of experimental psychology: of the stimulus that produced a certain response), unaware that we are responding to something that happens around us, or, while aware of both the stimulus and the response, unaware that they are connected in any way³ – but in all of these cases likely to feel strongly that we do know why we are acting. All kinds of things we do, from trivial movements of the body to profound decisions,

can serve as examples of this. I might avoid a certain food simply because I associate it with a person I strongly dislike, while being fully convinced that it is the mere preferences of my taste buds that lead me to dislike it. I might run my hand through my hair because out of the corner of my eye I just saw a friend in the back of the room doing the same thing, although if you asked me why I did, I would answer it is because it's so very hot in here. Similarly, it is well documented that we can easily be led to believe that we were entirely passive when in fact we acted, and conversely, that we were exercising control over a situation when we weren't, and that we generally overestimate the degree of control we have over our environment.⁴ It has been established that we often do not really know what we believe, despite feeling very strongly that we do,⁵ and that we have all sorts of tendencies and attitudes of which we are entirely unaware.⁶ For instance, an implicit bias test or implicit relational assessment procedure will, probably for each and every person reading this paper, show that they have, and operate on the basis of, some sexist and racist attitudes, even if we might all feel that we certainly are not subject to anything of the sort.⁷ So we cannot generally get reliable answers to questions such as why we are moving in a certain way, what beliefs and convictions we have, even why we took a certain job over another or why we are with a certain partner, by attending directly to the relevant beliefs, processes and decision-making procedures, because these beliefs and processes are simply unavailable to us.

These cases, of course, are quite different from the ones described earlier, in that direct attention here does not *disrupt* the relevant processes; it merely is impotent, because we are incapable of accessing these processes in such a way. Moreover, it should be noted that the limit they indicate applies solely to direct attention *through introspection*. For instance, it is not a given that we could not call something like an implicit bias test a direct measure⁸ in any sense of the word. Significantly, though, the limit to direct attention through introspection that these cases show there to be might still be a matter of a fundamental incompatibility. We can of course learn to recognise certain signals, and this may give us a slightly better chance of getting things right when we ask ourselves why we are doing certain things or how we feel about something. For instance, without knowing about the social dimension of yawning, we might attribute our uncontrollable urge to yawn in the middle of the seminar to a bad night, or to the tedious nature of the paper being presented. But since we all do know that seeing people yawn stimulates yawning, we

will probably notice a link between the person next to us opening their mouth just a bit too wide and our own inability to keep from taking an extra long and deep breath. As Nisbett and Wilson point out, though, this improvement in explanation would still not amount to an improvement in access to our higher-order thought processes. Rather, we would owe our getting it right to the correct application of an a priori theory, not to direct introspective access to a chain of stimuli and responses.⁹ If Nisbett and Wilson, and others such as Wegner, are right, our access to our own higher-order thought processes may well be fundamentally limited, even if in, say, the case of access to our own beliefs and desires it is merely less reliable than we generally assume without being absolutely precluded.

IV. A phenomenological perspective

Thus far, the situations in which I have shown direct attention to be limited have all concerned knowledge about ourselves and our minds. In order to gain a thorough sense of the limits of direct attention, one question that ought to be settled is whether *all* phenomena that cannot be disclosed through direct attention, or that are not best disclosed through direct attention, are types of self-knowledge. In other words: is the area in which direct attention is limited merely the area of knowledge about ourselves and our minds, or is it broader? In this section, I shall discuss some of the phenomenological work of Martin Heidegger, which suggests that, indeed, there are phenomena that are not instances of self-knowledge, but with regard to which direct attention nevertheless comes up short. While I do not have the space here to critically assess Heidegger's claims and descriptions, the following section is intended simply to provide an initial exploration of some potentially powerful avenues in thinking about the limits of direct attention.

In his early lectures and in *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger develops several critiques of traditional conceptions of the way in which certain phenomena are disclosed to us. In the course of these, he repeatedly emphasises that there are certain phenomena, some of which absolutely central to who we are, that we cannot come to know by looking at them directly. First and foremost, he argues, our knowledge about the world comes not via a distanced, disengaged perspective, but from our *going around* in this world, from our dealings with the things that surround us: "Die nächste Art des Umganges ist [...] nicht das nur noch vernehmende Erkennen,

sondern das hantierende, gebrauchende Besorgen, das seine eigene 'Erkenntnis' hat" (SZ 67).¹⁰ Our active engagement with the things around us, not disengaged perception, is what discloses those things to us in the first place. We "know" the doorknob not by holding it out at arm's length and studying it, but by using it, relying on it, finding it in place where we expect it. Indeed, what is most relevant about the doorknob manifests itself only in a context of use. Abstracted entirely from the fact that it is an object that exists to be used and handled, we can describe it as a round piece of wood or an elongated piece of metal with a sharp bend at the end, but those descriptions drastically fail to capture the "essence" of the thing we would thus aim to describe. Things like this, that are there as subjects of usage and handling – Heidegger categorises them as *Zeug*, or equipment – are never *merely present*; they are, as Heidegger puts it, *zuhanden*; ready-to-hand (SZ 69). And because they are "ready-to-hand", these things are not merely in the first instance encountered in use – in fact, they do not allow for being discovered, grasped and understood through any kind of distanced, disengaged observation. The specific ways in which, for instance, a hammer calls to be handled and allows for being handled – and these ways make up the very core of what a hammer is – cannot properly be discovered by looking at the hammer, but only by hammering. Heidegger here challenges both the dichotomy between subject and object – what an object like a hammer really is, is established only in relation to a handling subject – and the dichotomy between practice and theory: it would be a mistake to consider practice as the domain of action and theory as knowledge-giving; rather, practice has its own access to its own form of knowledge, which cannot be gained even through the sharpest and most rigorous theoretical stance. Importantly, the "practical knowledge" that we can gain from engaging with the ready-to-hand things around us is not merely "know-how"; it concerns knowledge of the deepest and most essential ontological structures.

Heidegger's critique entails at least two challenges associated with gaining knowledge of "ready-to-hand" phenomena. If we want to gain knowledge of their ontological structures – which, for Heidegger, is the very point of phenomenology as a philosophical endeavour –, we will somehow need to figure out how to register the knowledge produced in and through our interaction with the things we deal with. But this is not nearly as straightforward as it seems. First of all – and here a close parallel to the cases of distraction and absorption emerges – it is not clear whether, and in what way, such registration of practically derived knowledge

is compatible with the active engagement required to produce it. But Heidegger points out another problem. Even if we can in principle register the knowledge produced in active engagement with things in a different format, we are so used to analysing, explaining, and generally distancing ourselves from the objects of our philosophical interest, that there are all kinds of tendencies *in the way* of us relating to such knowledge. So in fact, it requires significant labour not to thwart our own efforts by disrupting the knowledge that naturally arises in our relations to things. “Die Gewinnung des phänomenologischen Zugangs zu dem so [*i.e.* in active engagement] begegnenden Seienden”, Heidegger warns,

besteht [...] in der Abdrängung der sich andrängenden und mitlaufenden Auslegungstendenzen, die das Phänomen eines solchen ‘Besorgens’ überhaupt verdecken und in eins damit erst recht das Seiende, *wie* es von ihm selbst her *im* Besorgen für es begegnet (SZ 67).¹¹

Importantly, Heidegger claims that such tendencies are not shallow ones that we can simply identify and repress or otherwise neutralise – our perception of the world around us is always at least in part shaped by them. This, then, does imply a firm limit to direct attention: we do, for the most part, not have direct access to the knowledge produced in our interaction with things, because we are burdened by irrepressible tendencies to cover over such knowledge by assuming a theoretical attitude. Simply turning towards these things, focusing on them, etc., will not show us their real nature, but reflect our own expectations and prejudices back onto us.

However, according to Heidegger, there are indeed situations in which knowledge about the ontological structure of things is made available to us in a direct immediacy. The opportunity for such immediate understanding arises in situations in which our active engagement with things is suddenly disrupted. When we, immersed in a task, reach for a hammer and find ourselves grabbing an item that is far too heavy, the inappropriateness or unavailability of the hammer for its use makes this piece of equipment stand out to us in a mode of mere presence (*Vorhandenheit*); a mode of being that stands in sharp contrast with the ready-to-handness we expect from it. In this way, the breakdown of the structure of use directly confronts us with the distinction between ready-to-handness and mere material presence, and with the fact that these are two radically different modes of being. Importantly, these revelations are not prompted by a conscious cognitive effort on our part. They arise when the network of reliance and

anticipation in which we are actively engaged directly and powerfully reveals itself in the moment it is disrupted.

A similar picture arises from Heidegger's description of moods. Moods, Heidegger argues, have the ability to confront us directly with certain facts about ourselves; facts that we may not normally be aware of, or indeed facts that we may habitually repress. "Ungestimmtheit", for instance, the (apparent) absence of any concrete mood, makes our existence stand out to us as a burden (SZ 134). Indeed, moods can disclose things that we cannot possibly *know*, "weil die Erschließungsmöglichkeiten des Erkennens viel zu kurz tragen gegenüber dem ursprünglichen Erschließen der Stimmungen" (*ibid.*).¹² The fact that our own existence is ultimately ours to carry can suddenly show itself plainly and purely, Heidegger claims, "gerade in der gleichgültigsten und harmlosesten Alltäglichkeit" (*ibid.*).¹³ In other words, knowledge disclosed by moods does not come to us as a matter of directly asking about our existence. Indeed, Heidegger describes the way in which we find ourselves in moodedness as "einem Finden, das nicht so sehr einem direkten Suchen, sondern einem Fliehen entspringt" (SZ 135).¹⁴ "Die Stimmung erschließt nicht in der Weise des Hinblickens auf die Geworfenheit, sondern als An- und Abkehr" (*ibid.*).¹⁵ So not only are such facts not disclosed in our directly and intentionally turning towards them, in fact they are principally disclosed in our turning away from them.¹⁶

Not all phenomena reveal themselves in situations of breakdown or through moods, though. As pointed out above, Heidegger takes us to have a strong tendency to *cover over* or *conceal* what is revealed in our relations to the things around us. Whether this is the result of a subconscious desire to repress what is disclosed to us, or (as would be the main obstacle in most cases) ways of thinking and the general assumption of a theoretical attitude that have become habits, these ways of thwarting the self-disclosure of the subject matter are generally not apparent to us, and (partly for that reason) cannot be cast aside in a single act of making space for a direct relation to such knowledge. For this reason, Heidegger reserves an important place for a methodological device he calls *Destruktion*; a critical, questioning attitude towards expectations, habits, constructions, categories, dichotomies, motives, states of affairs, that we consider necessary or self-evident.¹⁷ Importantly, since *that* and *how* we conceal what is disclosed in our active engagement with things – or which of our standards and ideals are merely fossilised contingencies – is not

immediately and directly perceptible, we must make everything subject to such deconstructive scrutiny.

This takes up the broader methodological theme I opened with, because Heidegger's suggestions for methodological adaptations necessary for disclosing the kinds of subject matter phenomenology deals with involve an important warning. While the conviction that philosophy always has to review the appropriateness of a certain method with respect to the relevant subject matter is central to the shape of Heidegger's phenomenological method, he also emphasises that such methodological attunement is not something that can be settled in advance of dealing with "the substance". Rather, an understanding of the ways in which one's method ought to attune itself to the subject matter under consideration must arise in the course of the investigation of the subject matter itself. Since this means that it is not possible to ever secure a solid starting point on which to base one's investigation, any part of the interaction between method and subject matter is in principle precarious, and the possibility of going astray is always present. For Heidegger, therefore, methodological considerations must continuously accompany all substantive work, and we must always remain alert to the possibility that we are being led in the wrong direction altogether.

What do Heidegger's critique and his alternative descriptions of the ways in which phenomena reveal themselves mean in relation to direct attention? Here I should note again that the form of direct attention that is my target in this paper is one that entails, at least implicitly, the idea of picking out something to observe and then focussing on it; an isolated subject held out at arm's length, where the isolation and distance are expected to aid the clarity and rigour of the inspection. Insofar as this is the case, Heidegger's critique goes to the heart of direct attention as an approach. He shows that ready-to-hand entities, and their ontological mode of ready-to-handness itself, do not reveal themselves to an intentional or theoretical stance, when isolated and regarded from a distance, but precisely in our active engagement with them. And he claims that moods disclose certain fundamental facts of our existence to us not insofar as we directly search for or look at, say, the nature of our existence, but precisely in our turning away from it. In other words: what is clear regardless of naming conventions or boundary decisions is that any kind of direct attention that would be compatible with an appropriate disclosive relation to ready-to-hand phenomena must not in any way be a matter of isolating an object and observing it from a distance. Insofar as

direct attention is a form of cognition, moreover, Heidegger's account of the disclosive role of moods implies a further limit to it, since he argues that moods can disclose certain phenomena that a cognitive stance cannot possibly capture. The cases derived from Heidegger form an important addition to the limits of direct attention discussed in the first two sections, for they do not merely concern the processes or contents of our own minds, but broaden the area in which direct attention is limited to ontological knowledge about ourselves and the world around us.

V. Conclusion

Going against a widespread and powerful trend in philosophy to rely on direct attention as an approach, I have in this paper aimed to show that the disclosive capacity of direct attention is limited. I have argued for three types of limits.

First, I showed that there are certain types of phenomena that direct attention is fundamentally incapable of disclosing, which, I concluded, is due to a tension between the nature of direct attention as an approach and the nature of certain types of subject matter. While the conclusion to the investigation of this fundamental incompatibility inevitably had a sense of *ad hoc*-ness – the question why direct attention is in tension with the phenomena I discussed was answered by concluding that it is ultimately in the nature of these things to be in tension –, several substantive characteristics of this tension have emerged in the process. First, it should have become clear that there is a group of phenomena – not just one single exceptional case – that cannot possibly be disclosed by means of direct attention. Second, this group of phenomena is made up at least in part of acts of mind, but (third) not all acts of mind – and indeed, not even all acts of mind that are characterised by a kind of immediacy – are vulnerable to this problem. Fourth, I argued that it is not awareness or attention *proper* that is problematic, but rather a second-order attention, or a meta-attention; a directedness of attention to the distraction or absorption as such. So the problem of methodological incompatibility does not lie in the subject matter *per se*, nor in the approach by itself, but always in the combination of subject matter and approach. Finally, it is of course a tangible result to establish that there in fact are some *instances* of such a definitional methodological incompatibility – that there actually *are* such phenomena that by their very nature are incompatible with direct attention.

Second, I showed that direct attention is moreover limited because we do not have direct access to our higher-order thought processes, or even to many of our own attitudes and beliefs. Questions as to why we performed certain acts or what beliefs we hold, therefore, cannot be reliably answered by directly attending to our reasons or motivations, since the true grounds of our actions are generally unavailable to us. While this limit may not be a matter of a fundamental compatibility, and in that sense less firm than the first, it has a very broad scope.

Finally, I drew on the early work of Heidegger to sketch a further series of cases in which direct attention is limited. I showed that for Heidegger, we cannot find out about the ontological structure of the world around us by selecting an object to be investigated and training our attention on that object directly, for first, certain types of knowledge arise only in our active engagement with the things around us, and second, we have an irrepressible tendency to *conceal* the knowledge that is produced in such interactions. Similarly, important facts about our existence are disclosed directly and without intentional prompting in and through moods; a way of disclosure that is radically different from directly and intentionally turning towards something. The cases derived from Heidegger form a significant addition to the former two categories, because here, the intended phenomena are not the contents or workings of our own minds, but the ontological structure of the very world around us. Direct attention, then, is limited in a number of different ways, and across a wide range of phenomena.

NOTES

- ¹ “About three years ago, I recounted, I was bathing with a young man, whose constitution at the time was imbued with a wonderful gracefulness. He was probably in his sixteenth year or so, and only from a long distance the first traces of vanity could be seen, summoned by the attention of women. As it happened, we had just been to Paris and seen the youth removing a splinter from his foot; the cast of this sculpture is well known and present in most German collections. At the moment in which my friend put his foot on a stool to dry it, he cast a glance at a large mirror, and it reminded him of the statue. He smiled and told me what a discovery he had made. In fact, I had, at that very moment, made the same discovery; yet – whether to test the solidity of his grace or to meet his vanity in a somewhat curative manner – I laughed and told him he was seeing ghosts! He blushed, and lifted his foot again in order to show me the effect; yet the attempt, as it would have been easy to foresee, failed. Confused, he lifted the foot a third, a fourth, even a tenth time: all in vain. He was unable to generate the same movement again. What am I saying? The movements he made had such a comical quality that it took me effort to refrain from bursting out laughing.
From this day on, almost from this very moment on, an inapprehensible change came over this young man. He started to spend entire days in front of the mirror, and charm after charm slipped away from him. An invisible and incomprehensible violence seemed to lay itself over the free play of his gestures like an iron net, and once a year had passed, he no longer bore any trace of the loveliness that had so delighted those who knew him.” (Kleist 1985: 319–320. Translation mine.)
- ² The interrelations between consciousness, awareness and attention are not at all straightforward, and are the subject of elaborate debates in philosophical and psychological literature. For an introduction to the question how consciousness and attention are related, see Stazicker 2011. For an argument that consciousness and attention are entirely independent in either direction, see Koch and Tsuchiya 2007.
- ³ Nisbett and Wilson 1977.
- ⁴ Wegner 2002; 2004; Pronin *et al.* 2006.
- ⁵ Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Hofree and Winkelman 2012; Clore and Robinson 2012.
- ⁶ Briñol and Petty 2012.
- ⁷ Greenwald, Banaji, Rudman, Farnham, Nosek, Mellott 2002; Gemar *et al.* 2001; Teachman *et al.* 2001, Barnes-Holmes *et al.* 2006.
- ⁸ In fact, this case provides an occasion to consider in more detail what exactly is the relevant sense of “direct” in the context of “direct attention”, although for reasons of space, I shall not go into this here.
- ⁹ Nisbett and Wilson 1977: 246–257.

- ¹⁰ “The nearest way of going about is [...] not cognition that merely takes in, but the act of provision, which uses and handles and which has its own ‘cognition’.”
(All translations of texts by Heidegger are my own.)
- ¹¹ “Gaining phenomenological access to those entities that are thus [*i.e.* in active engagement] encountered consists [...] in pushing away the tendencies to interpretation that crowd and accompany the encounter, which conceal the phenomenon of such “providing” in the first place, and in the same act even more so entities as they are encountered, of their own accord, in our providing.”
- ¹² “...since the disclosive possibilities of cognition fall far short of the originary disclosure of moods.”
- ¹³ “...precisely in the most unconcerned and harmless everydayness.”
- ¹⁴ “...a finding that springs not so much from a direct searching, but from a fleeing.”
- ¹⁵ “Mood discloses not by regarding thrownness, but as a turning towards and away.”
- ¹⁶ In the same vein, he emphasises that “disclosed” does not necessarily entail ‘recognised as such’. In order to be fully aware of what is disclosed through moods in such a way, more work will typically be required. But this does not take away from the fact that our initial access to such knowledge is dependent on a stance quite opposed to directly looking at the phenomena that are to be revealed.
- ¹⁷ In several places, Heidegger states explicitly that philosophers concerned with describing ourselves and the world around us cannot ask directly about the things they are interested in revealing. See, for instance, GA 62: 361; GA 63: 75–76; GA 17: 275.

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